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## Small but perfectly formed

Kunal Basu's tale of a 16th-century Indian artist, *The Miniaturist*, is every bit as perfect and detailed as a Mughal painting should be

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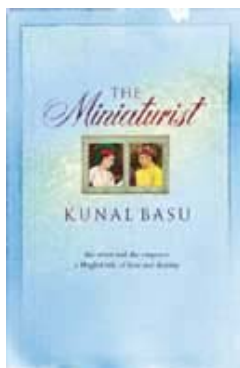
Mithu C Banerji

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### **The Miniaturist**

by Kunal Basu

Weidenfeld £12.99, pp224

Kunal Basu's first novel, *The Opium Clerk*, bravely trod on virgin ground when it was published in 2001. It was the story of an ordinary auction-house clerk caught in the dark depths and incertitude of the opium trade in seventeenth-century Bengal. The novel swept across settings in India and the Far East, through a labyrinth of mysteries and complexities, which was the once thriving colonial underworld.

Seen in the larger context of Indo-Anglian fiction preoccupied with themes of displacement and alienation, Basu's writing offered a refreshing narrative. Not only did he transport readers into an India that few knew existed but he also minutely recreated a lost time, abundant in its lavish imagery.

Basu's second novel, *The Miniaturist*, is a reflection of the writer's ability once again to weave a tale of immense originality and intrigue. It is set in the early part of the sixteenth-century, in an India ruled by the Mughal emperor, Akbar.

The narrative is set in his capital city, Agra, in the household of the khwaja, the master of his imperial workshop. The khwaja has a son, Bihzad, who, at a very early age, displays a rare genius as an artist.

discovery of a secret passion within himself. This discovery, in keeping with the norms of sixteenth-century religion and social practice, leads to his exile from the kingdom and an inability to practise as an artist.

From here, Basu takes Bihzad through an agonising journey of self-repudiation. Tormented by the loss of his art, Bihzad wallows in the quagmire of slave markets and drinking bouts in an oasis ruled by an invisible warlord. Drawn by Bihzad's reputation as an artist, the warlord asks Bihzad to marry his mysterious daughter, Zuhra. By now, the disconsolate Bihzad is unable to bring himself out of the mire he has sunk into and marries Zuhra.

At this point in the tale, Basu reveals the dark sexual underworld of Mughal India, the world of orgies and fantasies hidden behind demure purdahs and exuberant façades. Zuhra's promiscuity challenges Bihzad's creativity, which is one of the essential themes of Basu's writing - the loss and gain of the creative self in the face of public opinion.

Natural disaster forces Bihzad out of his adopted world and, wandering aimlessly, he faces the death and devastation around him. He begins to question the true value of art in an apparently godless world, the hypocrisy of depicting worldly beauty in place of the ugly reality of his surroundings. He resolves to give up painting once again and blindfolds himself so that vision cannot tempt him to relapse.

Bihzad's extreme suffering makes the reader almost nauseous at the thought of the self-inflicted fate he has chosen. An artist could not have fallen as low as Bihzad falls in an attempt to purge himself of his creative talent. He only finally releases himself from his torment when he meets the emperor Akbar on his deathbed.

The Miniaturist is an enchanting depiction of Mughal art. The narrative, woven intricately within the images, takes us not only to the opulent palaces of the emperor Akbar but drags the reader to feel the misery and stench of sixteenth-century Agra's slave markets. Basu allows the readers to peer with him into the closeted, perfumed air of Bihzad's stepmother's apartments and then reel back at the fetid aura of his wife's inner chambers.

It is a world of revelations, of passion and intensity which makes one think that Basu must himself have lived a Mughal artisan's life, so minute is his eye for detail, so precise and vivid his artist's empathy. The novel is neat, concise and sharp while it flows effortlessly through the vividly changing landscapes of Mughal India and its arid surroundings.

The Miniaturist is every bit as perfect and detailed as a Mughal painting should be. Well crafted in all its details of colour and texture, it is a craftsman's intensely passionate creation. It reads as a metaphor for writers and artists alike, to set free their creative spirit and not confine themselves to the trappings of social expectations.

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